

19 October 1973
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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Middle East War, Brezhnev's Position,
and Detente.

The outbreak of war in the Middle East poses problems to the USSR so serious and immediate that the Soviet leaders probably are taking their current decisions in a fully collective fashion. Brezhnev has not been known to harbor policy views on the region different from those of his present colleagues, and his propensity to locate and lead a consensus can be expected to come into play in a crisis of this kind. It is nevertheless of interest to consider the state of the Soviet leadership on the eve of the war, particularly since the crisis bears heavily on the durability of Soviet-US detente on which Brezhnev has exercised a highly personal leadership.

This memorandum analyzes how Brezhnev has been faring in recent weeks on the issue of detente, with attention to evidence on the reservations which this policy has inspired in domestic politics. It also considers, in a discussion on p. 8 the implications for Soviet detente policy of various outcomes of the war.

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It was probably inevitable that Brezhnev should have begun at about this time to encounter renewed difficulties in managing detente. Expectations of economic benefits to the USSR from detente await satisfaction. Thorny specific issues are succeeding the initial creation of a general political framework, and these issues require that a wider collection of Soviet interest groups be educated and involved in detente. His policy departs from tradition in many areas--rapprochement with West

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Germany, an end to autarky, development of relations of trust with the main capitalist enemy, extensive negotiations on arms control, acceptance of broader international contacts, to mention a few. It thus undoubtedly arouses different kinds of misgivings and requires reassurances to a number of anxious or suspicious elements in the Soviet body politic. The fearful will be quick to point to risks and costs, and the skeptical to the absence of early benefits. It can also be supposed, in the light of Soviet political history, that some of his colleagues will be jealous of his personal preeminence and ready to improve their position at his expense if policy vulnerabilities develop.

Throughout the summer and early fall, a number of indications have accumulated which point to such difficulties in the aftermath of Brezhnev's triumphs earlier this year. These indications include some unevenness in Soviet media treatment of detente and discipline themes, rumors and speculations among Moscow diplomats and journalists and foreign Communist parties, and some floating of trial balloons, followed by trimming, in recent Brezhnev speeches. The evidence is clearest on the issue which cuts closest to home--internal discipline--but it extends to other areas as well.

Detente and Internal Discipline

Brezhnev has hoped to balance a detente foreign policy with strict internal ideological vigilance fitted with a safety-valve of selective, controlled emigration. This policy has not been successful. The wrap-up of a long campaign to close down the dissidents' principal samizdat channel, The Chronicle of Current Events, has been blighted by the intransigence of Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, whose stature and impact at home and abroad is considerable. Western nations have been encouraged to barter strong CSCE action on freer movement of people and ideas as the price for their ratification of principles of non-use of force and inviolability of frontiers that

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are the Soviets' priority CSCE goals. Thus CSCE, a carefully nurtured Soviet detente initiative intended to reap an easy and dramatic success, drags on in controversy and may yet backfire. The US Congress is tying MFN trade status for the USSR to relaxation of Soviet emigration policy. Soviet officials have complained that the USSR has already made generous concessions on emigration, but that each new gesture of good will only breeds stiffer demands.

The anxieties of Soviet officials concerned about internal discipline are bound to increase as they see signs that the USSR is being maneuvered toward further compromises. Brezhnev himself undoubtedly fed these anxieties in a speech in Alma Ata on 15 August. He touted an exchange of values and information in relaxed conditions of international contact as a good way to sell Soviet socialism. This kind of rationale probably lay behind the cessation of jamming of VOA, BBC and Deutsche Welle broadcasts. If this move were intended to produce reciprocal Western restraints, in terms of the leashing of Radio Liberty, it failed. As matters now stand, the USSR has made a concession without what many would consider adequate compensation, and Brezhnev is potentially vulnerable.

At a party symposium in June, the ideological secretary in the Moscow party apparatus headed by Brezhnev's Politburo colleague Grishin is reported in a samizdat account to have warned that the most dangerous extremist reaction to detente is "opportunistic illusions." The secretary, V. N. Yagodkin, described these extremists as maintaining that Soviet ideology is so strong it need not fear criticism. Yagodkin, a notable ideological hardliner, is not likely to have spoken at an official symposium on the eve of the US summit in defiance of his boss, Grishin. If correctly reported, Yagodkin's June description of "opportunistic illusions" comes close to fitting Brezhnev's optimistic "victory through contacts" stance at Alma Ata in August. Whatever combination of conviction and foreign effect

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Brezhnev may have intended at Alma Ata, his formulation received such sparse initial replay in Soviet media as to suggest that it was greeted with considerable reserve in influential party circles.

Brezhnev took a more qualified stand on freer movement in his next speech, in Sofia on the eve of resumption of CSCE talks. He made clear that detente largely stops at the USSR's borders. He scornfully dismissed the Western idea that because the USSR is interested in political and economic cooperation it can be pressured into concessions.

Pravda on 7 October began laying the groundwork for possible defeat of MFN legislation with a statement that denial of MFN is "by itself, in no way capable of undermining Soviet-US trade." This tack signalled Soviet unwillingness to compromise further on trade-emigration issues, and minimized the importance of MFN per se. By the end of September there were signs that Brezhnev was getting the propaganda apparatus to include some flavor of Alma Ata in its traditional exhortations of vigilance. At the same time, the central press began to express cautious optimism that socialist education can be made capable of immunizing the population against subversive Western influences.

Other Detente Complaints

While the tugging and hauling is most visible on the issue of discipline, other matters have evidently come into contention.

--Private statements by Soviet officials, plus questions by Soviet citizens at public lectures, reflect a widespread concern over the wisdom of inviting Western firms to share in the exploitation and use of Soviet natural resources. The issue of "foreign concessions" has been a touchy one in Soviet history, and currently there is a clear concern that the West may deplete resources, particularly energy, which the USSR will need for itself.

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--The military remains worried about arms control agreements. Although the Ministry of Defense has a major voice in these negotiations and is evidently satisfied with the agreements to date, this concern persists. It was evident in a Red Star commentary of 15 September on Brezhnev's speech at Alma Ata on 15 August; military correspondent N. Shumikhin bobtailed Brezhnev's statement on the need "to supplement political detente with military detente, end the arms race, and then take practical steps to reduce armaments," closing the quotations at the phase "military detente."

--The Chinese problem, in Soviet eyes, has gotten worse, and Peking's attacks on superpower collusion and Soviet abandonment of both socialist and third-world causes have mounted.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] While he cannot in justice be blamed for the impasse with the Chinese, it is not an implausible speculation that Brezhnev has become vulnerable to charges of neglecting Soviet leadership of the international socialist movement by an undue concern and preoccupation with building detente with the West.

--It is likely that recent Soviet dealings with West Germany have taken some of the bloom off that rose. The Soviets seem to consider Bonn responsible for much of the Western pressure on freer movement at CSCE, and Brezhnev is reportedly annoyed with the slow progress on economic arrangements. Recent West German pressures on interpretation of the Berlin Agreements stir the fears of Soviet detente skeptics that Western partners may not be willing or able to honor their treaties.

Brezhnev's most recent speech, in Tashkent on 24 September, contained an unusually defensive statement on detente. In introducing the foreign policy section, he referred to unnamed critics who dismiss

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detente's achievements as half measures. "The principle of all or nothing is quite inapposite in international politics," he asserted. "Whoever sits idly by, neglecting albeit a small but real step ahead, impairs the cause of peace." In Soviet political parlance, this is a remarkably clear acknowledgement of domestic criticism, undisguised by being put into the mouths of foreign enemies. It is strong evidence that Brezhnev has to contend with the charge that detente, with its undoubted risks, has failed to produce countervailing gains for the USSR.

A Cult of Personality?

The fanfare surrounding Brezhnev's receipt of the Lenin Peace Prize, announced on 1 May and awarded with considerable ceremony on 11 July, is another potential danger to him. Since the spring, his political clients' speeches have carried flattery toward personality cult proportions. Emphasis on his personal role in foreign policy achievements has worked in the same direction. Well publicized volumes on his trips to Bonn and Washington have been published, in addition to collections of his speeches and articles. His US trip received heavy and personalized TV coverage in the USSR. Brezhnev's four speeches since July have been carried live on domestic TV, and he has clearly enjoyed playing to his audiences. In the last of these, in Tashkent, he also indulged in Khrushchevian use of the first person singular, digressions and one-upping local party leaders.

Stalin's and Khrushchev's excesses are still very much a part of the mental baggage of the present Soviet leadership, and collective sensitivities increase in direct relationship to gains in the party chief's political power and personal immodesty. Brezhnev, having made another advance in consolidating his power at the last Central Committee Plenum in April, may subsequently have been slightly overconfident. Two days after his return from the US and France, on 29 June, Pravda chose to review some

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party documents published months before and make a rare reference to the work of the party and Central Committee in liquidating the consequences of Stalin's cult of personality and in adhering strictly to Leninist norms of party life. The same Pravda review included an equally unusual reference to the statement in the resolution of the 23rd Party Congress in 1966 that a "scientific approach, collectiveness and business-like efficiency...must continue to form the basis of all its [party] activity."

Brezhnev's Considerable Assets

Brezhnev, however, has formidable assets to use against any incipient challenges to his leadership and detente policies. Perhaps the most important of these remains his demonstrated sensitivity to the permissible limits, at any given time, of political muscle or policy innovation. He has continued throughout the summer and fall to show that he knows when and how much to trim.

By any political patronage standard, Brezhnev's position has grown very strong indeed. In the critical matter of the harvest, potentially a fatal vulnerability for any Soviet leader, this year's good results promise to work to his advantage. Also, if the party ideologues are dragging their feet over detente, significant parts of the foreign affairs establishment are developing vested interest in protecting and deepening detente. The attitudes, statements, and activities of numerous MFA and Western-oriented institute officials amply attest to their involvement in detente equities. Indeed, one probable reason for recent high-level personnel movements in the Soviet foreign affairs establishment is an attempt to ease the transition of a basically conservative party and government apparatus into the challenges and complications of a detente era through a leavening of the Moscow bureaucracy by MFA officials with extensive overseas experience.

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Brezhnev and the Middle East

In the first week of October, the USSR's reaction to Middle East events was cautious. Its way of initially handling the crisis probably did not worsen Brezhnev's position and may have improved it somewhat in the short term. In the past he had avoided prominent personal association with the subject and had let his colleagues monopolize official visits to the area. While the fighting goes on, he and other Soviet leaders have repeated their intention to adhere to detente with the US and have eschewed the kind of propaganda attacks on Washington characteristic of past crises. But at the same time, Soviet political and material support of the Arabs has given proof--to Chinese critics and other possible doubters--that eagerness for detente is not so great as to lead the USSR to sacrifice its position in the Middle East. This stance, and the early successes of the USSR's clients, probably worked to Brezhnev's advantage.

So far so good. But the increasing level of Soviet resupply, other activities in support of the Arabs, and the delay in Soviet peace initiatives have raised questions about Soviet adherence to agreements with the US. And the Arab-Israeli war poses further dangers to detente under several possible outcomes.

Implications

A separate paper argues that the Soviets will see their interests in the Middle East best served by an early settlement which gives advantage to the Arab side. Brezhnev's stake in detente reinforces his interest in the early-settlement part of this formula, but probably will not lead him to differ strongly with his colleagues on Soviet tactics in the crisis. Both his own judgment of Soviet interests in the region and his unwillingness to make himself vulnerable on the issue will work in this direction.

If and when a ceasefire is achieved, however, he will have a particular concern to protect and revive

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the detente line. His possibilities in this regard will, of course, be determined by the outcome of the conflict. A major Israeli victory would, in Soviet eyes, so compromise the line of cooperative relations with the US that any resumption of detente initiatives would have to be slowly and carefully managed; Brezhnev could ill afford to show undue haste or eagerness. A major Arab victory would have a similar effect, but on the US side, Brezhnev could be expected, however, to carry out a holding operation, keeping detente on view as a stated Soviet objective and hoping, with the passage of time, for further opportunities to develop it.

A relatively even-handed outcome, on the other hand, would probably encourage Brezhnev to reaffirm Soviet detente policy. He would be inclined to present this outcome as a validation of detente, and so long as the settlement held, this would be a powerful domestic argument. He could persuasively claim that, because of the work accomplished in two summits, the USSR had been able both to stand up effectively for its friends and to enlist Washington in a successful effort to re-establish peace.

The success of this effort would depend heavily on US views--in an outside the Administration--of the crisis, its resolution, and the Soviet role in it. There is a good chance that Brezhnev, recognizing the crucial nature of these US interpretations, would move quickly to secure some new manifestation of the vitality of US-Soviet detente. This could be largely declaratory or cosmetic, but Brezhnev might feel that, in view of the state of US feelings, some tangible Soviet step of importance to the US was both necessary and justified to re-establish the momentum of the process. It is impossible to predict what step he might propose, but in the circumstances outlined, he probably would have the domestic political strength to make a move of some significance.

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